



HISTORY OF THE GREAT SALT POND SERIES

After 200 Years of Dreaming: The Birth of New Harbor

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The Industrial Revolution did nothing short of remake human society. Of the many longstanding impacts still echoing out from transforming fossil fuels into power, (which include the realms of economics, politics, and the environment) the Industrial Revolution

shrank both space and time. Before this event, everything moved slowly. Humans, crops, armies, and information moved at the same pace whether you consider the eras of George Washington or Julius Caesar. In terms of communication, the time of our Founding Fathers drafting the documents which would become that bedrock of our republic was no different than that of the Roman Republic in the Punic Wars. The fastest information could move was a good horse on a good road. The average American did not travel more than a few miles from their home. But as we

know, Block Island is not your average community and some of the ocean-going residents traveled the globe. However, if they did, the time away from the island would be measured in months or even possibly years.

The Industrial Revolution produced not only railroads crisscrossing the nation but, also the need for the first standardization of time as the "iron horses" rapidly arriving and departing train depots required that for the first time Americans be cognizant of the clock. One could argue that before the Industrial Revolution, there was no one Block Island community, but rather four or five. Multiple schools around the island point to this fact, it is not until 1933 that a single consolidated school opened on the island. Islanders, like most Americans, considered a trip of a few miles by horse and wagon as a journey. Gladys Steadman recalled as a young Block Island girl, "We used to go from the neck 'across Island' in a horse drawn wagon to spend the weekend!"¹ This notion of multiple communities on Block Island would begin to fade with the Industrial Revolution. First, in the mid-1870s it would provide the Federal power to construct Old Harbor. Then, 1895 it would allow for the 200-year-old dream of opening the Great Salt Pond up to the open ocean to come into fruition.

As the U.S. economy continued to inch towards the world's largest in the year 1890, the Federal government continued with projects on Block Island that assisted in sea navigation. In 1875 the U.S. Life-Saving Service expanded its responsibility by opening the Southeast Lighthouse atop Mohegan Bluffs on the southeastern portion of the island. The final investment,



Families digging for clams in the GSP remains a summer pastime on Block Island. This image of a nearly empty GSP in the mid-1960s was recently donated as part of the Mideleer/Mlecko Family Slide Collection.



overcoming the breachway which separated the Great Salt Pond (GPS) from the waters of the Atlantic, started in 1894 and was completed in 1898. This, along with the construction of a jetty to assist in maintaining the opening, established a second harbor (New Harbor.) The dream of the original European settlers of overcoming nature and opening the pond, and thus creating a harbor, finally came to fruition 233 years later.²

Now, with two harbors by the turn of the century, the island had radically transformed both in terms of its economics and the built environment in just twenty-five years. The year 1900 saw twenty-two hotels on the island that could house 2,500 guests. One author in 1904 described what this revised New England landscape represented for visitors from an America that had witnessed even greater alteration due to the Industrial Revolution. He wrote, "the Island no longer needs the aid of legend or poetry to bring people to its shores; it is...a Mecca for the invalid in mind and body, and a delightful summer home for those who would recuperate from the maddening whirl of modern life."³ Again, the author is referring to 1904, not 2004, with the "maddening whirl of modern life."

GSP, like the land of the island itself, is a hybrid environment. Part natural and part human, the GSP ecosystem was altered from a brackish pond into a harbor with access to the open ocean. Once opened, not only did Block Island gain a second harbor, but the rhythms of the oceans tides also commenced to ebb and flow into this unique body of water. At 484 acres, or .756 square miles, with an average depth of twenty-three feet, the GSP may seem like an unusual selection for a micro history of the 20th Century.

Yet, as our series on the GSP moves forward in the months to come we will see all the major forces shaping our modern world can be seen in the history of this body of water. From World Wars, to forms of recreational travel to invasive species, a historical study of the GSP is a micro history of human society in the 20th Century. This includes the concept of human impact on environments deemed worthy of visiting. For, as private watercraft ownership increased in the United States nationally in the wake of World War II, this fact is reflected on the microcosm of the GSP. As early as 1979 citizens were increasingly growing concerned about the state of the GSP in the summer months. As expressed in the Block Island Newsletter, "The phenomenal nationwide growth in recreational boating is leaving its mark on the harbors of Block Island."⁴



As our series moves forward into the 20th century, major regional events will also be seen in the history of the GSP, including the Hurricane of 1938. In this image from the Les Slate Collection, vessels are seen atop Rat Island after the storm subsided.

¹"Gladys Says..." *High Tide*, Vol. 1, Number 3, Block Island, April 1980, p1.

²Ritchie, *Lore and Legends*, 18.

³Charles E. Perry, "Block Island's Story," *New England Magazine*, July 1904, 524.

⁴Block Island Newsletter. January 1979. "New Harbor Exploitation" Block Island Residents' Association, 2.

OUR MISSION: To protect and enhance the environmental quality of the Great Salt Pond, including its shorelines and wetlands, and to promote appropriate and productive uses of the Pond's resources by residents, visitors and local businesses.

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